

## The end of civility

OMAR KHASRU

IT was surrealistic in more than one sense. Joy-e-Mamun, NTV reporter had just started an on-the-spot interview with Awami League leader, and former home minister, Nasim during the attempted siege of the Prime Minister's Office on September 12. Suddenly a contingent of belligerent cops swooped in on Nasim, seemingly without provocation, and started beating him mercilessly with batons.

Nasim fell to the ground and was lying on the street helpless, vulnerable, and unable to defend himself. Some young party functionaries surrounded him instantly and almost reflexively, providing a human shield and a semblance of protection from the incessant and vicious assault. The drama had unfolded around noon on Mirpur Road near the intersection of Road Number 27 in Dhanmondi.

Nasim was seriously wounded and so were a number of the party men who had tried to save him at the expense of their own safety. The whole episode was recorded on camera by an NTV cameraman. The police action seemed to occur in a deliberate, premeditated and well-executed manner.

The TV correspondent asked the police officer who was in charge of the area, and responsible for the aggressive thrashing of and attack on Nasim and others, why he felt compelled to take such hostile action. The policeman nonchalantly, unflappably, and in a matter of fact manner, denied the whole incident and claimed that the gratuitous and brutal beating never took place. When the TV reporter emphasized that he had witnessed the whole episode in person, and his cameraman had recorded the event, the cop walked away calmly stating that Joy-e-Mamun had seen it all wrong.

The police officers and their subordinates act as enforcers and, as a private, clandestine and mercenary battering brigade for the party in power, to be used during opposition party political protests. It now seems that police officers, just like politicians, also lie and embellish the facts without hesitation, consternation or compunction.

Or else how can a senior police officer casually, calmly and callously deny his complicity in the physical attack of a senior opposition politician, when the whole sordid event was recorded by a TV news camera for the whole world to witness, is beyond comprehension, and belies decency, decorum, or rationality.

Another senior police officer pretty much did the same, and followed the same beaten path during the recent hartal on 10 September. After spearheading a brazen attack on opposition activists he denied that it ever happened when confronted immediately after the incident by Farzana Rupa, a TV correspondent for ATN Bangla, even though the whole distasteful action and mayhem was recorded live on camera. Deniability usually requires a little more cover, a little more discretion, a little more intellect, an ironclad alibi and a lot more good sense.

The fact that these police officers undertake blatant, belligerent, and violent measures during opposition protest programs, followed by bald-faced defiance and disclaimers, is an indication of the approval of their carefree, callous and somewhat sadistic actions by their superiors in the police department and political authorities.

An overly-aggressive, fidgety and intolerant, devil may care police contingent has consciously and systematically beaten up a slew of Awami League stalwarts such as Nasim, Asaduzzaman Noor, and Saber Hossain Chowdhury in recent days. This would point to a deliberate plan, strategy, and policy of the ruling regime.

When you talk with the ruling coterie and their henchmen, they always point out that they were the victims of such cruelty and arbitrary thrashing and assault when they were in opposition and Awami League, the current opposition party in the parliament, was in power. What is puzzling, aggravating, and mind-boggling is why this retrograde, brutal, and vicious cycle of spiteful and vindictive actions need to be perpetuated ad nauseam. This is beneath rational and civilized contemporary enlightened thinking.

The Old Testament professed over 2500 years ago: "What ye shall sow, so shall ye reap." The two parties seem to practice this Biblical saying with fierce and brutal efficiency and in vicious cyclical continuity.

Unfortunately, it is too much to ask, or expect from, the two major political parties to change for the better, finer, more civilized and more humane actions and reactions. They seem to be mired in the quagmire of tit for tat retribution, restitution and violent vindictive acts. Civility, decency, kindness, nicety, and such finer human traits and instincts, seem to be either confined and interned or exiled in the process.

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CAPT. HUSAIN IMAM

THE brutality with which Mr. Saber Hossain Chowdhury, political secretary to the leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina, was beaten up by the police during the Election Commission siege program of Awami League-led 14 party opposition parties on September 6, is inconceivable in any civilized society. The question is whether we can at all call ourselves a civilized society.

As we could learn and see from newspaper reports and television coverage, Saber Hossain Chowdhury was mercilessly beaten and kicked by at least half a dozen policemen until he fell to the ground and became unconscious. According to the briefing by the doctor at Apollo hospital, Saber Hossain Chowdhury was so badly hit in his belly that his liver and kidney were critically injured.

The incident was simply shocking and outrageous. However, to us as ordinary citizens, more shocking is the reluctance of our so called civil society, who are supposed to be the conscience of the society, to condemn and protest the incident in the strongest possible terms. We have no words to condemn the action of our police force and the inaction of our civil society. When will our civil society, if there is really one, wake up and rise to the occasion is probably a question worth asking at this critical juncture of our national life.

This is not the first time that we are witnessing such barbaric scenes being enacted in public by our law enforcing agencies. We had the misfortune of watching a similar ghastly incident of police high-handedness, though in a different situation, in the Chittagong stadium during a cricket match between Bangladesh and Australia, early this year, when a white bearded photo-journalist of 60-plus age was beaten and kicked like a football by our police right in front of the spectators and the cricket players of both the countries. The old man's only fault was that he had an altercation with a police officer regarding his gate pass to cover the match.

Had the civil society, the professional bodies, and the journalists in particular, taken up the matter with the administration more seriously at that time, and ensured exemplary punishment of the persons responsible for the incident, something similar could not have possibly been repeated. On the contrary, we were surprised to see how easily the police officer, who was mainly responsible for the offence, was let off the hook, and how quickly the leaders of the journalist community called off their agitation program without achieving anything other than a few thousand taka compensation for the journalist, a pat on the back, and a false promise by the State Minister for Home Affairs

## Two sides of the same coin? Really?

There have been sad occurrences of firing upon and killing of farmers, workers, and villagers by police and BDR during the BNP rule. Kansat, Shonir Akhra, Phulbari, and Khulna incidents to be specific. Can they cite examples of similar incidents during the Awami League rule? A number of Awami League leaders, Shah AMS Kibria, Ahsanullah Master, Ivy Rahman, Momtajuddin, to name a few, have been killed by bullet, bomb, or grenade attacks during the current BNP-Jamaat rule. Can they cite similar incidents of killing of political opponents during the Awami League rule of Sheikh Hasina?



Lutfuzzaman Babar for a judicial investigation. This is not the first time that the ruling alliance has used the state machinery to subvert a peaceful political program of the opposition parties with an iron hand. We have seen how ferociously and mercilessly the police swooped upon the opposition activists, including the women activists, whenever they took to the streets with political programs. They did not even spare people like Motia Choudhury and Mohammed Nasim, who are not only the senior-most leaders of Awami League but were important ministers.

We hear from BNP supporters, and even from some intellectuals pretending to be neutral, that Awami League also did the same thing when they were in power. Can they cite a similar incident where persons like Dr. Mosharrar Hossain, Barrister Nazmul Huda, Barrister Moudud Ahmed, MK Anwar, or any other senior leader of BNP, were deliberately targeted by police and brutally assaulted for participating in street agitations during the Awami League rule?

The reason why I have used the word "targeted" is that nobody will believe that the police did not recognize Mohammed Nasim, Motia Choudhury, or Saber

Hossain Chowdhury. Though we do not want to believe it, but after having seen the live television coverage of the incident, the only rational inference we can draw is that Saber Hossain Chowdhury was targeted, and acted upon, by the police at the behest of some interested quarters in the ruling party.

Even if, for argument's sake, we say, or even find proof, that Awami League also did the same thing when they were in power, can this be a justification for what the ruling alliance has been, and still is, doing in dealing with the opposition programs in a democracy. Rallies, processions, street

agitations, siege, and even hartals, as long as they are held peacefully, are widely accepted opposition programs in a democracy. Denial of these rights of the opposition parties may be acceptable to some other "crazy," but certainly not in democracy.

A lot of people, surprisingly mostly from the educated section of our society, think that Awami League and BNP are two sides of the same coin. I suppose that they mean both Awami League of Sheikh Hasina and BNP of Begum Khaleda Zia are equally responsible for the poor performance of our democracy. But they never explain how.

There have been sad occurrences of firing upon and killing of farmers, workers, and villagers by police and BDR during the BNP rule. Kansat, Shonir Akhra, Phulbari, and Khulna incidents to be specific. The reason being that the people of those localities wanted diesel and electricity for cultivation of their land, water for drinking, protection of national wealth from foreign capitalistic aggression, or long outstanding wages for their work in the factories. Can they cite examples of similar incidents during the Awami League rule?

A number of Awami League leaders, Shah AMS Kibria, Ahsanullah Master, Ivy Rahman, Momtajuddin, to name a few, have been killed by bullet, bomb, or grenade attacks during the current BNP-Jamaat rule. Can they cite similar incidents of killing of political opponents during the Awami League rule of Sheikh Hasina?

As an Awami League legislator has said in a television debate, there may be one hundred and one faults with Awami League, but there is a limit. The BNP does not have any. Let those of our intellectuals who think that Awami League and BNP are two sides of the same coin prove it.

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## Alternate 9/11 history

JONATHAN ALTER

FIVE years after 9/11, the world is surprisingly peaceful. President Bush's pragmatic and bipartisan leadership has kept the United States not just strong but unexpectedly popular across the globe. The president himself is poised to enjoy big GOP wins in the midterm elections, a validation of his subtle understanding of the challenges facing the country. A new survey of historians puts him in the first tier of American presidents.

As Bush warned, catching terrorists wasn't easy, but he kept at it. At the battle of Tora Bora, CIA operatives on the ground cabled Washington that Osama bin Laden was cornered, but they desperately needed troop support. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld immediately dispatched fresh forces, and the evildoer was killed. While bin Laden was seen as a martyr in a few isolated areas, the bulk of the Arab world had been in sympathy with the United States after 9/11 and shed no tears. After their capture, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and other 9/11 terrorists were transported to the United States, where they were tried and quickly executed.

Today, al-Qaeda remains a threat but its opportunities for recruitment have been scarce, and the involvement of the entire international community has helped dramatically reduce terrorist attacks worldwide. Because Bush believes diplomacy requires talking to adversaries as well as friends, even Syria and Iraq were forced to help. By staying "humble," as he promised in 2000, he preserved much of the post-9/11 good feeling abroad, which paid dividends when it came time to pull together a coalition to handle North Korea and Iran.

At home, some aides suggested that Bush simply tell the nation to "go shopping." But the president knew he had a precious opportunity to ask Americans for real sacrifice. He took John McCain's suggestion and pushed through Congress an ambitious national-service program that bolstered communities and helped train citizens as first responders.

Soon Bush put the country on a Manhattan Project crash course to get off oil. He bluntly told Detroit that it was embarrassing that Chinese automakers had better fuel efficiency, he classified SUVs as cars, and he imposed a stiff gas tax with a rebate for the working poor. To pay for it, he abandoned his tax cuts for the wealthy, reminding the country that no president in history had ever cut taxes in the middle of a war. This president would be damned if he was going to put more oil money into the pockets of Middle Eastern hatemongers who had killed nearly 3,000 of our people. To dramatize the point, he drove to his 2002 State of the Union address in a hybrid car. Sales soared.

When Karl Rove suggested that the war on terror would make a perfect wedge issue against Democrats in the 2002 midterms, Bush brought him up short. Didn't Rove understand that bipartisanism is good politics? Lincoln and FDR had both gone bipartisan during wartime, he reminded his aide. So when evidence of torture at the prison camp in Guantanamo Bay surfaced and Rumsfeld was forced to resign, former Democratic senator Sam Nunn got the job. With post-9/11 unity still at least partially intact in 2004, Bush was re-elected in a landslide.

Taking a cue from Lincoln's impatience with his generals, Bush was merciless about poor performance on homeland security. When the head of the FBI couldn't fix the bureau's computers in a year's time to "connect the dots," he was out. And Bush had no patience for excuse-making about leaky port security, unsecured chemical plants and first responders whose radios didn't communicate. If someone had told him that five years after 9/11 these problems would still be unsolved, Bush would have laughed him out of the office.

In 2003, Vice President Cheney advised the president to take out Iraq's Saddam Hussein militarily. But Bush was beginning to understand that his veep, while sounding full of gravitas, was in fact reckless. When it became clear that Saddam posed no imminent threat, Bush resolved to neuter him, Kaddafi style. When the president found, after a little asking around, that the 10-year cost of invading Iraq would be a crushing \$1.2 trillion, he opted out of this war of choice.

Five years after that awful September day, even Bush's fiercest critics have learned an important lesson: leadership counts. Imagine if we'd done the opposite of these things. This country -- and the world -- would be in a heap of trouble.

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## Is the middle-class unhappy?

It appears that the kitchens of the middle-class are on fire. In real terms, the plight of the middle-class has not lessened over the last five years, although the economy has achieved more than 6 per cent rate of growth. It appears that the relatively impressive rate of growth has been eaten up by the prevailing inflation. During the last election year under AL, the rate of inflation was below 3 per cent while the growth rate was 5 per cent. Whereas, under the 4-party alliance, this year (election year again) the expected growth is around 6.5 per cent against an inflation rate of 7 per cent.

ing down, or sending up, the governments under our type of democracy. In this commentary, our aim is to see how the middle-class is doing under the present regime.

Theoretically, social scientists in modern times define middle class in numerous ways. The common criterion, however, is the comfort the middle class think they are entitled to from the politicians in both social and economic needs: food, shelter, education, health, and law and order. If any one of these needs comes under threat, the middle-class ruthlessly uses its power during the election time. Bangladesh is not an exception.

As mentioned earlier, the AL suffered a massive defeat in 2001 due to the desertion by the middle-class. From a recent visit to Dhaka by the present author it appears that the incumbent government has also failed to keep the middle-class happy, if not in law and order terms, then certainly in terms of controlling prices of food items. Let us see below how the comfort of the middle-class has been attacked due to the uncontrolled increase in prices of food items:

The following conclusions emerge from this table:

! A middle-class family, of four adults, would need at least Tk.10,000 per month for food (reflects prices at Kawran Bazar only).

! As a rule of thumb, the middle class spends 50-60 per cent of total income for food (it is 80-90 per cent for the poor). This means that a family must earn Tk.20,000 per month before its comfort zone in food has been hurt.

! Except a handful of posh suburbs (Gulshan, Baridhara, Banani, Dhanmondi, and some inner suburbs), the middle-class live in the densely populated outer suburbs of the city where a single income family does not earn more than Tk.15,000 per month.

! In a majority of the cases, prices at Nandan (retail grocery shop for the consumers belonging to top-class) are close to the Kawran Bazar prices. This suggests that, at least for prices of food items, the class differences are less evident, although the income difference is.

In view of the above, it appears that the kitchens of the middle-class are on fire. In real terms, the plight of the middle-class has not lessened over the last five years, although the economy has achieved more than 6 per cent rate of growth. It appears that the relatively impressive rate of growth has been eaten up by the prevailing inflation. During the last election year under AL, the rate of inflation was below 3 per cent while the growth rate was 5 per cent. Whereas, under the 4-party alliance, this year (election

year again) the expected growth is around 6.5 per cent against an inflation rate of 7 per cent. What does this mean?

It means, in real terms, a growth of 2 per cent (5-3) was achieved during the last year of the AL regime. In contrast, the real growth under this government in its last year is likely to become negative (6.5-7). Moreover, the economy has been thrown into stagflation (high growth together with high inflation) in the short to medium term. It appears that the prices of food items and energy costs have been contributing most to the current high inflation regime, while clothing, rentals and electronic items remain relatively stable.

The PM, in almost all of her political gatherings, has been claiming that under her government the nation is floating on unnyan-er-joar (high tide of development). It appears, unfortunately, that this high tide has failed to inundate the kitchens of the middle-class in Dhaka city.

Having said that, what message is on hold for the middle-class of Dhaka? We are afraid that the message is not good. Economically, a worse time is ahead for the nation, regardless

of which coalition (14-party or 4-party plus Ershad) wins the next election. There are three major reasons for this:

One, in terms of food supply, the future production of rice is not looking good due to an unprecedented dry spell in the northern districts. Moreover, a sustained supply of imported food grains, particularly from India (genine or black market), looks uncertain at this stage since India has lost its self-sufficiency in wheat this year after enjoying almost 20 years of surplus production. Recently, India imported a ship-load of wheat from Australia, and more is on the way. In the world market, there is an upward pressure in food grain prices. Unfortunately, with the record level of energy price together with an increased price in food grain the future for Bangladesh does not look promising.

Two, the so-called high tide of development certainly helped a handful of politicians and their cronies in accumulating wealth over the last five years (Dhaka city has been inundated with new cars). This kind of accumulation was never witnessed in BNP's first term (1991-96) and AL's term in 1996-2001.

Khaleda-Nizami's present term is a parallel to that of HM Ershad's in the 1980s in terms of corruption and opposition bashing. The black money of a few, generated an unprecedented demand for energy (conversion of cars to CNG is a case in mind), in turn, putting further pressure on energy prices. The high energy price is also affecting production of food grains at a time when drought conditions have engulfed half the nation.

Third, the present inflation

cannot be said to be demand driven since the real income has not increased over the last five years for the vast majority of the middle-class, plus there has not been fiscal expansion for employment growth in recent years. The present inflation regime is rather a case of supply-side phenomenon (supply-shock).

And, this is not only because of incompetence in governance, but also to existing drought like condition and international events. Unfortunately, there is no sign of a settling of the present unsettled world order, soon. This could even take a nasty turn, if the west goes for a hardline solution to the nuclear crises involving Iran and North Korea.

In conclusion, a bumpy drive is unavoidable in the future as far as Bangladesh's economic management and governance are concerned. Unfortunately, on the one hand, our politicians in government have lost sight of the future direction of this nation. They are too busy with taking ad hoc measures and indulging in rhetoric for winning the next election.

The opposition on the other hand, injured under the brutal hands of the incumbent government, has been suffering from dampened morale, and is failing to take advantage of the misrule and mismanagement of the Khaleda-Nizami regime.

Under these circumstances, the middle-class in Dhaka must take a long hard look when electing a government in the next general election, not only for the greater interest of the nation, but also for their own.

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Table: Retail prices of selected food items in Tk/kg, 26-31 August 2006		
Item	Kawran Bazar price	Nandan shop price
Rice: Miniket	26	27
Meat:		
- Beef	150	150
- Mutton	200	-
Fish:		
- Hilsha	250	-
- Rohui	300	300
Lentils	54	65
Soybean oil (5lit container)	220	285
Onion	18	20
Garlic	60	70
Potato	16	18
Sugar	42	45

Source: Snap survey at Kawran Bazar; Nandan grocery promotion leaflet